

Background: Omicron variant of COVID is currently surging in King County. We are observing an unprecedented number of infections and now an increasing number of hospitalizations due to COVID illness. We have observed several challenges to staffing for healthcare and industry as a consequence of the surge. We must work together to limit infection and keep individuals, workplace, and patients safe. Fortunately, we know more about omicron and have better tools to manage this difficult circumstance.

Recommendations

Masking and social distancing: During this current surge, we need to continue to mask, social distance, and practice good hygiene including staying home if we are ill. Ideally, staff will wear at least a surgical mask and preferably an N95 respirator while at work. Cloth masks appear to offer little protection against the omicron variant.

Point of Care COVID Testing: Routine screening with point-of-care COVID testing (POCCT) for individuals presenting to work can enable identification of asymptomatic, infected individuals and help maintain workplace and individual safety. The screening strategy has enabled management of circumstances that could have otherwise had a much larger and adverse impact on the workforce. Although supply lines remain a work-in-progress, Public Health has prioritized the supply of POCCT to support the EMS workforce.

PCR confirmation for positive POCCT: Given the current challenges of accessing timely PCR testing, we will forgo the need for PCR confirmation for a positive POCCT test at this time. A positive POCCT is sufficient to confirm infection.

Isolation: For persons with COVID infection, the CDC has modified recommendations for safe return to work. The change is based on an understanding that the omicron infection cycles more quickly especially among those who are vaccinated so that the course of infection is substantially shorter. As a consequence, the isolation period for vaccinated healthcare workers can be reduced to 7 days (from 10) so long as the individual is feeling better (free of fever for at least 24 hours) and has a negative antigen POCCT upon day 6 and upon presentation for work on day 7. Once the provider has a negative test following the infection, there is no need to do POCCT for the next 30 days. If the POCCT is positive on days 6 or 7, the individual must revert to the full 10-day isolation period. (Additional tests serve no purpose after a 10-day isolation.)

Quarantine: Following an exposure, individuals can continue to work but must undergo POCCT each day they present to work. If an EMS agency is already doing routine POCCT screening, this approach to quarantine will be the routine. If an agency is not performing routine screening, then the exposed individual shall perform POCCT for 7 days following exposure.

Booster Dose: There is increasing evidence that the booster provides important additional protection against the omicron variant. Please (please) consider a booster.

These guidelines have been discussed with Public Health and University of Washington leadership.